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# SOME DIFFICULTIES IN DOING WITHOUT ETERNITY

BY WINIFRED KIRKLAND

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HAVE any of us noticed what a fairyland we lost when we stopped believing in eternity? There was a glamor and glitter about that past playground of religion which makes our present creed of science barren and chilly. If today we write the word Eternity in white chalk on a blackboard, and gazing at it try to recall what it used to signify, we shall find this exercise of the spirit most joyous. The word reminds us how we used to slip away from hurry to bathe in a sea of timelessness, refreshing to every taut nerve. How we exalted and expanded in the belief that eternity would give us all that we could not get in the present, for that was what eternity was for; we should never again be sick or sad or bad. In eternity we should be no longer the puny spawn of monkeys, but beings good and great and glorious as angels. Eternity was full of shining light and serried ranks of singing hosts. Majestic figures from the past walked its wondrous streets and we ourselves walked with them. There was the gleaming of a golden and immortal city, our home at last. There was even in our vision of eternity the presence of God.

Such was the fairyland of faith where once we walked confidently. It is banned now even from our fancy as irrevocably as the elf-kingdom of the nursery. No one now believes we live after we die; it is even deemed reprehensible to want to. Yet for those of us who formerly possessed eternity it is hard all at once to get used to doing without it. We agree with science that eternity should be abolished in the interests of an efficient spiritual life, and yet without eternity, we sometimes ache with our abrupt adjustment to being merely mortal. Creeds and other comforts have a way of slipping away from us without our seeing. Time

and again we can be found blindly struggling to adapt ourselves to some deficiency in our supply of beliefs without any clear conception of the nature of the hole or of our resources for either filling it or enduring it. The present age suffers all the awkwardness of being transitional. In a few decades babies will be born immune to any faith or fear in regard to the future, but meanwhile it is well to examine our present difficulties in passing from immortality to annihilation, and perhaps to discover a little help for hobbledehoyes. A transitional period should be a little patient with itself, for it suffers both the growing pains of stretching to the demands of the future, and the rheumatic twinges of belonging to a decaying past.

The first difficulty of our adjustment has the nature of a growing pain, being due to our still imperfect response to the demands of science, which bewilder our dulness by apparent contradiction. When science is all the time bidding us to batter down doors, it is confusing to the mind to have science herself declare that death is the only door that opens nowhere. In every other department of research we are encouraged to the wildest flights of imagination and hypothesis. It is therefore increasingly difficult as we become increasingly inured to scientific adventure, to stop short before the most provocative of all phenomena, the human spirit in its eventful cycle. Eternity seems the only thoroughly scientific explanation of the soul. At a mere superficial reading each human life appears like a chapter from a serial rather than a complete volume or a fugitive page tossed on the wind. The chance-blown paragraphs reveal so much that suggests a vigorously conceived plot, powerful characterization, dramatic incident, intense emotion, rich background, that it is almost impossible not to formulate a synopsis of preceding chapters, and to conjecture the denouement following the catastrophe of death. It is even at times hard to withstand the conviction that there must have been an author. One could almost suspect him of breaking off at a crisis on purpose to make us eager for the next instalment. The figure of speech may perhaps make clear to us the primary trouble of our being transitional, namely the difficulty of being both scientific and unscientific at the same time, for our instinct to understand and explain tends to destroy our pleasure even in the torn chapter we hold in hand; it is hard to work up a proper

reading enthusiasm in the face of a positive assertion by science that there will be no "continued-in-our-next."

The most cursory study of our bygone belief reveals at once other troubles for the present generation in trying too suddenly to get along without a future. We suffer from the working within us of old instincts and superstitions not to be violently uprooted,—rheumatic heritage of souls in process of transformation. While our reason admits that there is no valid excuse for being immortal and that our perverse hankering after such a condition argues us self-centered and self-important, all the same there is peril in too abruptly removing the props to personal prestige promised by the mythical joys of our lost fairyland. Our anticipated survival gave us a sense of superiority to the insects, prevented our being sensitive to the silent scoffings of the roadside stones that so long outlast us.

Evanescence tends also to undermine our personal affections. It hardly seems worth while to be over-fond of relative or friend whom a breath of wind may snuff out like a flame. Why should beings more brittle than beetles go about loving each other as if they were gods? Morally, human frailty was often subconsciously controlled by keeping ourselves fit for the society we expected ultimately to enter, that of saints and sages and perhaps of God himself.

The first effect of destroying all these expectations is disastrous for people who were far more dependent on them than they dreamed, for to tell the truth, eternity in the old days had so little apparent relation to our daily conduct that the complete rejection of the concept is like that of some bodily organ whose functioning is deemed negligible until it ceases. In a few generations people will find as much inspiration in being finite as we used to find in being infinite. Meanwhile for us who have the luck to be transitional there is perhaps a compromise.

Apart from our personal pangs, the loss of eternity has had effects, social and political, that intensify our private discomfort. Perhaps if our difficulties are clarified we may recognize how burdened we actually are, and be willing to allow ourselves a makeshift leniency. Chief among the public phenomena directly traceable to the absence of eternity is the war. On a basis of strict mortality, war for aggrandizement becomes the only legitimate activity for person or nation. Reason shows that since death ends all, material

things are the only things worth getting, and even more clearly shows that since human beings are as finite as mosquitoes, they are no more worthy of preservation. Germany is the most laudably logical nation in the world, but her logic has been a little uncomfortable for the nations who are more sluggish in evolution, and who will still cling to their retrogressive respect for spiritual valuations and to their obsolete reverence for the human soul. Of course if Germany had not purified herself from all taint of faith in eternity, she might conceivably have waited for permeation through peace, instead of being in such a devil of a hurry to chop a way through for her culture. Doubtless in the course of time, other nations will attain Germany's serene heights of pure reason; but at present it is necessary frankly to admit that aggression, while our brains pronounce it a most rational pastime, is still for our imagination and sympathies one of the chief temporary discomforts of doing without eternity.

Next to the war in importance of effect stands the high cost of living. Of course we all know there is enough food for everybody to eat and enough money to pay for it, provided that nobody wants more food than he ought to eat, nor more money than he ought to spend. However, now that we know with absolute certainty that we die when we die, any man would be a fool if he did not try to eat as much and to spend as much as he possibly could. Food and money are the only fun the finite can have; and naturally the effort to get as much of both as possible, sends prices soaring. Without penetrating too far into economic intricacies, one can connect the decline in value of the Apocalypse with the advance in value of eggs. The high cost of living is directly due to the high cost of dying; when dying costs annihilation, people have to work pretty hard to get a life's worth out of seventy years.

Of causes of distress taken in order of popular complaint, next to the war and the high cost of living stands the new poetry. The relation between imagism and immortality is so obvious as to be invisible. Granted that the aim of literature is to mirror life, the imagist's insistence on aspect versus interpretation is inevitable, for plainly literature should not deal with meanings when life, being mortal, cannot have a meaning. Sensation alone is sufficiently ephemeral to be true to life, whereas a poem that attempts

to express some significance beneath phenomena has a tendency to outlast its generation, and runs the risk of endurance, and of becoming in some notable instances even immortal, whereas such a reversion towards stability either in a poem or in a person shows each alike false to our faith in flux.

Those of us, however, who cannot all at once throw off the thrall of the poor old poets of our infancy must be content to go a bit slowly, trusting that our descendants will attain complete responsiveness to the poetry of the evanescent. We perceive humbly enough how reactionary we are, but our obstreperous instinct for explanation corrupts even our literary tenets so that with senile obstinacy we sometimes wonder whether even from its own purely æsthetic point of view the new poetry does not miss something the older poetry possessed. Meaning, adroitly introduced into a poem, sometimes produced a pretty little art of its own, a blending of outer and inner attributes that had in itself a kind of grace. It is even more heterodox to question in looking back, whether a poet's effort to explain was not stimulating to his imagination, making him actually see things more vividly in their external aspects by his very concentration on their inner qualities. Certainly no imagist poet for all his preoccupation with picture has ever produced as vivid descriptions as did Browning, a poet above all others avid for meanings.

We of today may as well acknowledge first as last that our feet, set in infancy to the pace of eternity, will never step lively enough for the present age. While deprecating the breathlessness of keeping up with the contemporary, the most old-fashioned of us must admire its valiancy. We are not nearly so lazy as when we used to leave some of our development to be accomplished after the temporary setback of death. Our own muscles are a bit stiff, however, and as we conscientiously whip them to the requirements of high speed pressure, we must comfort ourselves with the thought that our posterity will be able to fly without experiencing any of our awkwardness.

The spiritual leisure and lethargy resulting from a reliance on eternity to finish up what we could not get done on earth, obviously clogged the wheels of progress, which now can anywhere be seen whizzing along without any brakes. We open the advertising pages of any periodical, to find

that speed is the dominant advantage offered with every commodity. Get-healthy quick, get-learned quick, get-rich quick, are the headings under which most of our advertisements might be grouped. We are all familiar with the photographed faces of the people who will show us how to reach a maximum of attainment in a minimum of time. The gentleman with the arresting index finger leaps out at our laziness to teach us how to be successful in ten lessons. Success is a word that could not even be defined before the abolishment of eternity, with the resultant denial of all criteria but the immediate.

While haste is necessarily painful for our still imperfectly adjusted mentality in every department of life, we must allow for our being peculiarly sensitive to the changes it necessitates in the training of youth. In the old days when death graduated us into eternity, we had much more time to devote to education. There was in our early years an agreeable luxury in the pursuit of learning. We did not have to practice the rigid economy of the correspondence school, or of languages by phonograph. As we look back it seems as if minds were richer when they did not have to be so niggardly in the luggage they took for their journey. This is but the sentimental vapping of the senile, for in our sane moments we perceive as clearly as does the most modern pedagogue that Greek and Latin are impedimenta to retard the boy of today in the race set before him, and we believe with the publisher-purveyors to youth that the compendia of useful knowledge furnished by them offer the handiest possible canned nutriment for a period that has time only for acquisition, not for digestion.

As regards the study of the classics we did not at first perceive that to annul the future involved annulling the past, and yet practically giving up eternity has undermined our interest in history. Conviction of mortality enjoins the conscience to concentrate on the contemporary so intensely that past events become obscure. Unless we have eternity before us we really have no time to look behind. Yet some of us have a yearning for history that used to find satisfaction in fancying that our little age fitted into a sequence of ages. It contributed to a false but agreeable complacency to gaze back into an endless past as it did to gaze forward into an endless future. Of course abolishing eternity does not necessarily obliterate the past or explicitly forbid our

going back there to visit, it merely makes today so important that we have no time whatever for yesterday.

In this matter of educational adjustment as in others, a transitional period suffers enough to permit itself a little humoring of its prejudices; we should not attach too much guilt to a surreptitious enjoyment of the ancients so long as we do not corrupt the youth of our acquaintance by teaching them any of our respect for antique art. So long as we are doing our conscientious best to free our boys and girls from the cumbersomeness of a classic education, we may feel that we have done our duty, and may indulge a secret delight in the dusty shelves that reveal to us the grace that was Greece and the glory that was Rome. It is all right so long as we do not let the children know, for that bygone beauty is strangely seductive and glamorous, and contact with it might sap their energy in pursuing fortune and fame and food, which should be the sole preoccupation of people appointed to die.

Indisputably speed must be the desideratum of all activity, educational or other. Now the chief distress we older ones experience from speed is not that it leads to success, but that so often it leads nowhere. The old-fashioned custom of having a purpose in a pursuit makes it difficult for us to enjoy pure giddiness as heartily as do our younger contemporaries. Haste, first introduced as a method of extracting from the temporary what eternity used to supply has become an end in itself, so that a great many people ask nothing else of life but to feel themselves whizzing. Since nothing is permanent except impermanence, the one thing to do is to go spinning along, cautious only of bumping into a destination. As a consequence of trying to catch up in one lifetime with all the activity of eternity we have acquired such exhilaration, such momentum of energy, that there is nothing that we are so afraid of as the impact of arriving somewhere. The profession of flux as a creed necessitates the practice of flying as a habit. Yet with this very profession of faith I find that I have arrived at a heresy.

Now this heresy consists of the argument plainly approved by pure logic that if the purpose of speed is to get the most out of this life because there is no other, then no movement at all is just as rational as too much, and we have a perfect right to select any spot of our mental landscape that suits us and sit down on it, convinced that it is just



as sensible to get our money's worth out of life's little day by being stationary as by being giddy. On the principle that ephemeral beings have a right to any fun they can find is founded the advice to our age toward which this entire discussion has been directed. Baldly stated, the proposal is this: the best way of doing without eternity is to pretend that we do not have to! The suggestion is frankly so absurd that any reader is permitted to smile at it as freely as does the writer. We have lost eternity and we cannot bring it back by pretending that it is still there. The point is that we do not want to bring it back, but we do want to discover some way of being comfortable without it. Believing that there is no eternity, but living as if there were, is not a process possible to all people, and is therefore urged only on those capable of so separating their reason and their imagination that the two can function separately from each other. Many people are happily thus constituted, and still more can become so if they try. There is, moreover, no real sin in the course, because we are rather true to our imaginations than false to our convictions, and besides, we do no proselyting; we merely allow our own fancy the refreshment of revisiting our lost fairyland.

The chief obstacle to the compromise is that its absurdity is exactly balanced by its efficacy, in other words you can't tell how good it will feel until you try it, and if you are an over-rational and over-conscientious person you will think it beneath your dignity to try it. Yet actually there is nothing that contributes so much toward a sense of well-being as pretending, for a few minutes each day, say just before getting up in the morning and just before going to sleep at night, that you are going to live after you die.

After a few weeks of this exercise, that embarrassment we experience in the presence of nature becomes less painful, whereas when we are too acutely conscious of mortality we are shamed by an insensate oak, by a rock we could pound to powder for its silent sneer at our evanescence. If we make believe that we are as good as they are, we can hold up our heads to the sky and the stars, and even venture to penetrate the social exclusiveness of the sky and mountains. A man who pretends that he is immortal is not so deafened by the cannon of the contemporary that he cannot hear the still sweet voices of the little flowers. An association with the ancient aristocracy of sea and forest is good for

a person, but it is almost impossible to feel at ease in this society unless we temporarily assume an equality with it in permanence. This secret leniency toward our abandoned faith tends to enhance our joy in human comradeship as well as in that of nature. In actuality human affection is so menaced by fate as to resemble the surreptitious whispering in the schoolroom while the teacher's back is turned. When the loftiest spiritual converse may at any time be broken off by the malevolence of a molecule called a germ, some of us would rather never love anybody, as the only means of getting even with being ephemeral. On the other hand if we can manage to simulate a sense of survival, and can picture death as a mere voyage, we can enjoy comradeship up to the very last minute, and shout confident *au revoirs* even while the boat is pulling out to sea.

A faith in a future secretly indulged is stimulating to mentality. If we assume for a few minutes even in jest that perhaps our life's chapter has a meaning, instantly our ingenuity is off to invent other chapters past and future. Before we know it our minds are glowing as we discover some passage of grand and sustained style, or are tingling with the glorious guesswork of an entire synopsis. If we are gifted with any dramatic instinct, we are as likely as not, while we turn the pages, to find ourselves appropriating the hero's part, and bearing ourselves a bit more nobly, with a dim notion of being destined to still greater actions in the next instalment. Pretending that perhaps after all our life has a meaning makes us acquit ourselves rather better than we otherwise should in the tragic episodes, and makes us enjoy the comic scenes with a twinkle kindled at imperishable fires. Even hazarded surmises about the creatorship of our life's romance sometimes give a sense of rest and relief not as yet afforded by the prevalent doctrine of pure flux.

A little self-indulgence in eternity will not only enfranchise our conversation with our contemporaries and quicken our brains to decipher the book of humanity, but will tend to keep our minds, manners and morals in trim for association with the great and good of all ages. We used to believe that the halls of the dead were thronged with noble spirits toward whose wisdom and beauty our pilgrim feet would surely sometime find the way. This hope helped us to keep ourselves in order, much as the exiled Englishman restrains

himself from slumping by donning his dress-suit in the jungle solitude. Of course when evolution from the eternal to the ephemeral is fully accomplished, nobody will need any fillip to personal prestige, but for us poor intermediates, painfully hobbledehoy, it is a secret education in noble manners to pretend to ourselves that some day we shall be called upon to meet Socrates or Buddha or Christ.

Why not have a little patience with ourselves, we poor devils who have to bear all the brunt of the transition from eternity to evanescence? If we promise not to corrupt advancing youth, if we promise not even to corrupt our own reason by any genuine faith, can we not safely play that our life's chapter is going to be continued?

For after all, what if there should be an Author?

WINIFRED KIRKLAND.